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The Practice of Theology in Marriage

ADAM BARON

As a person who is not yet married, the idea of developing a “theology of marriage” has been a very meaningful practice for me. Furthermore, the whole subject has been of acute interest given my personal family narrative. In this essay, it is my hope and intention to integrate my own narrative with all of the vast and varied biblical and theological reflection I have given to the subject.

To begin this exercise I would like to briefly articulate the narrative that has informed me the most concerning this subject, my own. In the words of Fredrick Buechner, “I not only have my secrets. I am my secrets. And you are your secrets.”¹ Buechner articulates in his autobiographical trilogy that, “Each life is not just a journey through time but a sacred journey.”² Therefore, Buechner admonishes, “Listen to your life. See it for the fathomless mystery that it is. In the boredom and pain of it no less than in the excitement and gladness; touch, taste and smell your way to the holy and hidden heart of it because in the last analysis all moments are key moments, and life itself is grace.”³ In this spirit, my life has been full of such moments and events that relate profoundly to this subject of a theology of marriage.

I was born into a devout Roman Catholic family. At my parents’ wedding, three priests officiated the sacramental rites of marriage, so there was no doubt that they were thoroughly married! However, ten years and three boys later, those marriage rites were severely challenged. During the late 1970s and early 1980s, a number of factors caused my father to seriously question his commitment to my mother, and subsequently, to our entire family unit. He decided to separate from my mother and moved out of the house. As an eight-year-old boy I didn’t understand all the details. I simply knew that my father, who was once there on a regular basis, was no longer a part of our lives. For the next ten years I lived in a paradox. My home was as normal as any home with three boys, but quite abnormal at another level. I remained in the same house, had the same friends, went to the same school and church, and was as active as any other suburban kid. However, I had a secret in my house, and that secret was that my father had left my mother, brothers and me for another way, another life. It isn’t my purpose here to retrace all those years and events, but for the purpose of developing a theology of marriage, I cannot escape the significant ways in which those early years shaped my view and understanding of marriage. I am able to see today how my world-view has been influenced both positively and negatively by that struggle and its eventual outcome.

It has been a sacred journey, and the grace of God was manifested in my home first and foremost through my prayerful mother, who honored the covenant she had made before God and my father. As a result of her faith in Jesus Christ, my mother approached the circumstances through the lens of devotion to God and devotion to her covenant husband. I believe that something “sacramental” (as marriage is understood in the Roman Catholic Church) did take place when a 23-year-old and 22-year-old got married on December 28, 1968. It wasn’t the ceremony itself that covered them during the thin years of their separation,

1. Buechner, Fredrick, *Telling Secrets: A Memoir* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991).

2. Buechner, Fredrick, *The Sacred Journey: A Memoir of Early Days* (New York: Harper Collins, 1982).

3. Buechner, Fredrick, *Now and Then: A Memoir of Vocation* (New York: Harper Collins, 1983).

but rather an ongoing and developing relationship with Jesus Christ that held the threads of covenant loosely together. For the next ten years my parents remained separated, my mother actively pursued a deep relationship with God, incarnating biblical examples and metaphors of covenantal marriage. The story of Hosea and Gomer is probably most appropriate to mention here, because I know that it was a source of great strength and inspiration for my mother. During that time, we never knew where our father lived, we didn't see much of him, and he filed for divorce on three separate occasions. However, my mother remained prayerful and faithful to my prodigal father, and after ten years nothing short of a miracle happened when my father came back home to stay.

LISTENING TO MY LIFE TODAY

Listening to my life today, seeing the sacredness in hindsight, and being honest about the secrets, I have come to some understanding of what a proper theology of marriage looks like in practice. I am compelled to do the theology justice because I feel a great sense of obligation to the narrative, in the boredom and pain of it no less than in the excitement and gladness. In the ensuing years, through my twenties and early thirties, I have had ample time to reflect on those thin years when my father was not around. Through my own reflection, prayer, and sometimes-feeble attempts at intimacy, I have learned to see the significance of a theology of marriage that was born in the particular choices of my own father and mother. Today my parents have a marriage that makes people envious. They both love God, each other, and are able to minister out of the space and grace that was imparted to them sacramentally and through them incarnationally.

From this place, from the soles of my feet and into the soul of my life, is where I begin a theology of marriage. In addition, I would like to comment on a few relational cul-de-sacs of the 21st Century. My male and female contemporaries come to the idea of marriage with all sorts of positive and negative points of view. There seems to be a whole generation that I would humbly categorize in three ways—as the Walking Wounded, Endurance Runners, and Romantic Explorers.

The Walking Wounded have grown up with stories similar to my own, or with stories that didn't lead to such miraculous endings. Because of fear, anxiety and hurts from the past, the Walking Wounded have never completely gotten over those experiences that have negatively defined the ideas surrounding marriage. As a result, they carry a great deal of doubt as to whether or not they can really have a successful relationship.

The Endurance Runners are so caught up in their own successes and achievements, that they do not see the time for marriage as an achievement in and of itself. In the Endurance Runners' mind, marriage is further down on the list of priorities. A successful career, materialism and meaningful experiences outside of marriage are simply more important.

Finally, the Romantic Explorers enjoy the thrill of exploration but cannot seem to pick and stick with one person for another kind of adventure, that of marriage. The Romantic Explorers are also heavily influenced by our consumer culture; they live with the false notion that there will always be something or someone "better" around the next corner.

These are simplistic examples of a cacophony of dating dilemmas that I have experienced myself, and that I see on a regular basis with friends and the students with whom I work. Moreover, I am mainly thinking here of what Christians experience. Outside the Christian culture, I believe the circumstances are at least as, and possibly more, complicated. It is valuable to mention these things here, because as I have reflected on marriage in its socio-biblical context of the "other world," I cannot divorce my own theology of marriage developed in "this world." Before integrating a biblical understanding, I wanted to briefly state the big picture paradigms that have colored my understanding of marriage.

THE OLD TESTAMENT'S PRACTICE OF THEOLOGY IN MARRIAGE

Turning now to the biblical text, I have worked out my own theology of marriage Theo-centrally. By Theo-centric, I mean to begin and end with God's purpose for men and women in creation and in the covenant of

marriage. I trust I am not being too presumptuous in assuming that I can speak for God on these matters, but as a follower of Jesus Christ, I do believe that the Lord has given me a manual, and many metaphors to direct my heart and mind concerning marriage. I intend to describe God's purpose through the sociological paradigm in which marriage was introduced in Genesis, and end with the socio-biblical christological paradigm expressed in the teachings of Jesus Christ and the Apostle Paul's dyadic paradigm shifts in his Pastoral Epistles. The areas I aim to cover are the creation of "adam" (humankind); the covenant between Yahweh and the people of Israel throughout the Old Testament, with particular reference to the story of Hosea and Gomer; Jesus' teachings on marriage when he reacted to pointed religious questioning; and, finally, the Apostle Paul's teaching, in which marriage was used as an illustration of virtuous Christ-like discipleship.

In the beginning was the beginning; God made *adam* (best translated humankind) and all of creation, and in the making God said that it was good (Genesis 1.27).⁴ Fundamental to my understanding of this biblical passage is that God created humankind, male and female, in his own image (1.27 and 5.1-2). Together they would be "image-bearers" of God. One was not created more like God and the other somehow less like God. Rather, together there would be a focused mutuality in their distinctions as well as in their likenesses, as a full reflection of God's own nature. Additionally, in verse 28 of the first creation account, it says that after creating all things, including "male and female," God blessed them and gave them the task of being fruitful. In chapter 2 we seem to have another account of creation, and in 2.18 we begin to see more clearly something of the theological and sociological purposes of God. The one thing in this account that God said wasn't good was *adam's* aloneness. Therefore, in verse 20b, when an appropriate helpmate was not found amongst the rest of creation to meet the companionship of *adam*, God engaged in new creation, that of the *woman*, who would be bone of *adam's* bone and flesh of *adam's* flesh (2.23). This creation act was mutual, the only distinction in the creation story is that the two were different in their form but not in their value. In fact, at the heart of this creation account, we read in verse 24b that though distinct, in addition to being fruitful, their ultimate role would be oneness together. Therefore, in the created order, God made male and female in his image, an image that would be of mutuality, with the purposes of bearing God's image, being fruitful, satisfying aloneness, and becoming one flesh. These four functions address the particulars as well as the transcendent purpose that God intended for men and women.

However, considering the sociological context of these biblical narratives, there is little doubt that mutuality was not the way marriage expressed itself throughout the Hebraic culture, straight through the Old Testament and into the New Testament. A top-down model governed marriage in this culture; mutuality did not mean equality. In the social order of the biblical world, men were the political, religious and tribal leaders, and women were the followers, servants and at worst, indentured slaves to the family order. Marriage was a social, political, fertility and workforce contract more than anything else. This view greatly demythologizes any romantic notions we might want to give to the "love stories" of the Bible. Certainly we can make assumptions that love was involved (see the Songs of Songs). However, the true love story and ultimately a theology of marriage develops when we understand Yahweh as a covenantal God with the people of Israel—Noah (Gen 9), Abram/Abraham (Gen 15, 17), Isaac (Gen 26), Jacob (Gen 28), and Moses (Exod 2.24-25). In Exodus we read, "God heard their groaning and he remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac and with Jacob. So God looked on the Israelites and was concerned about them." Love meant God's unconditional fidelity and saving acts of righteousness toward the people of Israel. God was the model, not the prevailing culture or the fickle devotion of the Israelites. Even in exile, through the prophet Jeremiah, God says, "My eyes will watch over them for their good, and I will bring them back to this land. I will build them up and not tear them down; I will plant them and not uproot them. I will give them a heart to know me, that I am the Lord. They will be my people, and I will be their God, for they will return to me with all their heart" (Jer 24.6-7). These examples of Yahweh's covenantal devotion to Israel begin to give us an understanding

4. All biblical references are from the New International Version unless otherwise noted.

of God's purposes, and therefore also our self-understanding in the covenant of marriage. His ways define and shape our ways- not the other way around. In the Old Testament, the most significant example of this is through the prophet Hosea's marriage to Gomer. Through his marriage, the prophet incarnates the metaphor of unconditional fidelity and saving acts of righteousness that Yahweh had for Israel. By "saving acts of righteousness" I mean that God showed his fidelity toward wayward Israel through justice, compassion, mercy, faithfulness and steadfast devotion. Here is the heart of a theology of marriage, as defined through the Old Testament narrative.

Connecting this "other world" with my own, I believe that these convictions about covenant are what sustained my mother's devotion to my father during his absence. How God established his covenant with Israel and expressed this covenant through "saving acts of righteousness" is what I saw my mother do with my father. My mother's devotion was not based upon feelings or circumstances; her devotion was based on fidelity and a fierce love for her family. Humanly speaking, these were painful years. There were no romance or compatibility charts. There wasn't even much contact! In a sense, my father was in exile the way that Israel was in exile, and my mother stood in the gap for my father. I do not think she would have been able to stand in the gap for ten years if she had not known God's righteousness for herself (through justice, mercy, compassion, faithfulness and steadfast love). As God grew larger in her own heart, she began to have the heart of God for my father. Or, stated another way, how the Lord related to my mother, my mother related to my father. The Lord disciplined my mother through this season of her married life, and by association won all three of her sons and her husband for Jesus Christ. I am afraid that the prevailing culture doesn't think very much in these terms. We base so much on compatibility, choice, and a consumer mentality that it makes it nearly impossible to imagine engaging with such "saving acts of righteousness." Even the Christian sub-culture has embraced a theology of marriage centered on psychological compatibility and choice versus covenant. The sad irony is that the former will never achieve the latter without covenantal acts of righteousness.

THE NEW TESTAMENT'S PRACTICE OF THEOLOGY IN MARRIAGE

Covenant can sound very clinical if thought of outside the context of Christian discipleship. The key to my mother's ability to remain in covenant with my father was not ceremonial vows that technically sealed their marriage before God; it was the real presence of Jesus Christ in their lives. Therefore, a theology of marriage would be grossly inadequate without the first act of God in life towards a true Christian devotion and total surrender to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. This is the key to everything! This is the heart of Jesus' teaching in the Gospel of Mark. In the *Inclusio* (Mark 8.22-10.52), Jesus teaches about true discipleship. With the Pharisees, he even uses a pointed conversation about divorce to get at the soul of real discipleship. There is a rhythm in this section of the Gospel: Jesus makes a "passion prediction" (I will suffer and die), the disciples do not understand (evidenced by argument, rebuke and the struggle for power), Jesus then teaches about authentic discipleship. In the case concerning divorce (Mark 10.1-10), Jesus himself returns to Genesis and challenges the Pharisees to examine God's original intentions. The Pharisees are looking for a loophole, and the Lord wants them to look at their hearts. Mark 10.8-9 states "and the two will become one flesh. So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God joined together, let no man separate." We might be able to fish out an idea of Jesus' views here regarding marriage and divorce, but considering the larger context of Jesus' teaching, his aim is directed toward true discipleship. As a result of getting discipleship right—i.e., denying self, taking up your cross, loosing your life for the other, being a servant to all, a slave to all (Mark 8.34; 9.35; 10.43)—you will be a true follower of Jesus Christ and citizen of the kingdom. These passages of scripture relate profoundly to a theology of marriage in at least three different ways: First we see the Messiah saying that he must suffer and die. Hence, are we in marriage exempt from the cross? Second, the disciples and the Pharisees engage in argument, rebuke, and power struggles. How often is that a part of marriage and wrong discipleship? Finally, Jesus says if you want to be an authentic disciple, then

lay your life down and be a servant. Is this not a good recipe for marriage? Once again we see God relating to us, now in the covenant of his own blood, and modeling for us the kind of authentic discipleship we ought to live, whether single, divorced or married. It is all about Christ's model at the cross.

Finally, in the New Testament the Apostle Paul uses marriage as an illustration for virtuous Christian discipleship. Through authentic Christian discipleship, a man and a woman can help one another grow as followers of Jesus Christ. In personal discipleship "saving acts of righteousness" become the Christ-like values and virtues that guide their marriage. However, the gravitas of his teaching often gets misread because of his reference to submission (Eph 5.22). Read today, the idea of submission carries all kinds of deeply negative connotations. However, in Paul's teaching he is actually reversing the dyadic paradigm (as he did with the Jewish/Gentile questions in Ephesians 1-2). Paul teaches, "Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly beloved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God" (5.1). The misreading comes when we do not consider the socio-biblical Christology that governed Paul's teaching. Paul is thinking like Jesus Christ as expressed in the Gospel of Mark above. He is advocating a life surrendered first to the Lordship of Christ, and then to one another. He dramatically shifts the impetus by advocating a Christ-like submitted life across all social categories. This is very radical teaching. Essentially, Paul is saying, while the world may or may not demand a submitted life, the cross still does, therefore, men and women in true submission to Jesus Christ ought to submit and surrender control to one another in mutual love. Paul makes it clear, "Do not be yoked together with unbelievers" (2 Cor 4.16). But, as believers, like Yahweh with Israel, there is now a new covenant between Christ and the church and that covenant is a beautiful metaphor for a theology of marriage hidden in God. In this kind of marriage, two authentic disciples of Christ become one; there is a genuine imbedded *shalom* (nothing missing and nothing broken). There is peace and wholeness found with each other at the foot of the cross. Though Christians vary on their subsequent views concerning authority and function in the home, I cannot imagine that such a radical submitted life between co-heirs in Christ does not ultimately mean total equality and partnership. We are called to, "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ" (Eph 5.21).

In conclusion, from creation to the cross, these virtues have become the benchmarks in my theology of marriage. I am still a work in progress concerning marriage, in the same way that I am still a sanctifying work in progress as a disciple of Christ. My personal narrative and the culture I have grown up in have helped me see how marriage itself is an act of authentic discipleship. The covenantal story of my parents' marriage and the severe challenges that were placed on their covenant has pointed me to the covenant keeping God. These events have revealed to me the heart and soul of God's righteous acts, which have been saving acts for my entire family. In marriage, with the help of God and the example of Jesus Christ, we can help each other grow into the potential of the person we were made to be. Starting with creation, God made male and female in his image to be fruitful, satisfy aloneness and become one flesh. Throughout the Hebraic history and culture we then see God expressing his fidelity to the nation of Israel through covenantal devotion. Through the story of Hosea's and Gomer's marriage and restoration, we see a particular metaphor for God's intense devotion. In the New Testament, the life and teaching of Jesus Christ as the Son of God express the quintessential model for all Christian devotion, including the practice of theology in Christian marriage. The Apostle Paul affirms this authentic discipleship by using marriage as an illustration for the submitted life that all Christians, regardless of position, are to emulate. As a result, human beings can fully experience a wholeness and personhood that hints at God's original intent, ultimately leading our lives into a congruency and *shalom* with another, modeling Christ's relationship with his Church, just as the bridegroom lives in harmony with his bride.

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